

**ECHOES OF THE UNDERWORLD. MYTH, VOICE, AND FEMINIST
COUNTER-NARRATIVE IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S
"THE HANDMAID'S TALE"**

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Abstract: This article examines *"The Handmaid's Tale"* (1985) by Margaret Atwood through feminist myth criticism, focusing on its reconfiguration of the Persephone myth. Though never explicitly invoked, the myth's structure underlies the novel's construction of Gilead as a dystopian underworld defined by ritual violence, reproductive control, and spatial entrapment. Rather than retelling Persephone's descent and return, Atwood dismantles its redemptive cycle, replacing silence with the fractured voice of Offred—a contemporary Persephone whose narrative remains suspended, her agency fragmented but enduring. The analysis draws on the works of Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and Judith Butler to read Offred's voice as a theoretical performance. Her disrupted narrative enacts "écriture féminine", resisting coherence through memory, sensation, and affect. Kristeva's concept of the semiotic reveals a bodily rhythm beneath Gilead's symbolic order, while Butler's theory of performativity exposes how Offred inhabits her assigned role subversively, destabilising power from within. The novel's conclusion and its paratextual "Historical Notes" reflect the erasure of female voice by patriarchal knowledge systems, echoing mythic appropriations of Persephone. Atwood transforms the myth into a feminist countermyth—one of survival without transcendence—offering a narrative of voice, memory, and resistance from within the darkness rather than beyond it.

Keywords: gender performativity; feminist criticism; myth rewriting; embodied resistance; narrative voice; symbolic violence

1. Rewriting Persephone: Feminist Myth, Resistance, and Power in *The Handmaid's Tale*

Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is widely recognised as a seminal feminist dystopia, interrogating patriarchal control, reproductive subjugation, and female resistance under theocratic totalitarianism. While scholarship has extensively examined its political dimensions, this article argues for a deeper engagement with the novel's sustained dialogue with classical mythology, particularly the myth of Persephone. Rather than offering a direct allegory or intertextual allusion, Atwood reimagines the Persephone myth as a symbolic and structural matrix through which themes of descent, captivity, loss, and narrative disruption are re-inscribed. In doing so, the novel transforms myth from a patriarchal structure into a terrain for feminist resistance, centred on embodied female experience and fractured voice.

Traditionally preserved in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, the Persephone myth recounts the goddess's abduction by Hades, her conscription into the

underworld, and her partial return—a mythic logic used to explain seasonal cycles. Yet feminist revisions have revealed the violence masked in this tale: the silencing of Persephone, the erasure of consent, and the framing of abduction and rape as divine will. Such critiques challenge the redemptive structure of return, exposing how mythic symmetry often encodes female subjugation as cosmic necessity.

Atwood's Gilead functions as a contemporary underworld, where fertile women are stripped of identity, subjected to ritualised violence, and reduced to reproductive vessels. The protagonist, Offred, becomes a modern Persephone—not in name, but in function. Having been taken from a life of relative autonomy, she enters a system that regards her body as sacred property. However, unlike the cyclical logic of myth, Offred's story remains suspended. There is no spring, no definitive return—only ambiguity, fragmented memory, and precarious narration from within.

The article proceeds in four parts. First, it reads Gilead as a reimagined underworld through spatial, ritual, and linguistic structures that encode captivity. Second, it shows how Atwood reworks the mythic structure by rejecting closure, replacing the myth's redemptive arc with narrative fracture. Third, it engages feminist theory—particularly that of Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and Judith Butler—to explore how Offred's voice operates as a form of resistance. Her narrative enacts *écriture féminine*, embodying Kristeva's semiotic through rhythmic, affective disruptions of patriarchal language. Butler's theory of gender performativity further highlights how Offred inhabits her assigned role with ironic subversion, producing instability from within the mechanisms of control. Finally, the article reflects on the "Historical Notes" as a paratextual erasure of female voice, echoing how myth has historically appropriated and overwritten Persephone's agency.

Building on recent feminist myth criticism, including Alison Horbury's *Post-Feminist Impasses in Popular Heroine Television. The Persephone Complex* (2015), Melanie Daifotis's work on body objectification in *The Myth of Persephone: Body Objectification from Ancient to Modern* (2017), and Carla Scarano D'Antonio's analysis of mythological intertextuality in *An Intertextual Reading of Female Characters in Margaret Atwood's Work* (2021)—the article argues that Atwood's novel is a feminist countermyth. It refuses the narrative reconciliation offered by traditional myth, replacing it with a poetics of survival, haunting, and narrative refusal. Offred's story does not resolve but persists, haltingly and incompletely, in the darkness of Gilead. Through voice, memory, and bodily inscription, Atwood reclaims the mythic from within, transforming it into a space of feminist endurance rather than transcendence.

2. Gilead as Underworld: Space, Ritual, and the Myth of Descent

To understand the symbolic gravity of Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale*, we must approach it not only as a dystopia of social control but as a mythic underworld, structured by themes of ritual, captivity, and spatial descent. While Atwood never directly invokes the name Persephone, her narrative resonates with

the myth's architecture. Just as Persephone is seized from the surface and drawn into Hades—a world beneath, beneath memory, beneath speech—Offred finds herself removed from the world she once inhabited and placed into a regime governed by ritual, surveillance, and bodily sacrifice. In both cases, the woman's agency is overwritten by law, and her subjectivity becomes mediated by ritualised repetition.

In classical mythology, the underworld is not merely a geographical location; it is a realm of transformation, silence, and suspended identity. In Gilead, this underworld is rendered in spatial and psychological terms. The regime's architecture and affective atmospheres produce a claustrophobic environment governed by ritual, fear, and uncertainty. Surveillance is not only visual but existential, internalised as an ever-present condition of living under total control. As Offred reflects,

*sometimes a black-painted van, with the winged Eye in white on the side. The windows of the vans are dark-tinted, and the men in the front seats wear dark glasses: a double obscurity. [...] When the black vans reach a checkpoint, they're waved through without a pause. The Guardians would not want to take the risk of looking inside, searching, doubting their authority. Whatever they think.*¹

This sense of suspended identity and enforced stillness aligns with the mythic logic of the underworld: a space where time is disjointed, where the self is observed but not seen, and where transformation is contingent on the interpretation of silence. Atwood's Gilead reproduces this mythic affect not with Hades' darkness but through the dim corridors of bureaucratic power, ritualised language, and ambient threat.

Even Offred's room, which initially seems like a sanctuary, becomes a liminal space, closer to a tomb than a chamber:

*There must have been a chandelier, once. They've removed anything you could tie a rope to. A window, two white curtains. Under the window, a window seat with a little cushion. [...] I can sit in the chair, or on the window seat, hands folded, and watch this. Sunlight comes in through the window too, and falls on the floor, which is made of wood, in narrow strips, highly polished. I can smell the polish. There's a rug on the floor, oval, of braided rags. [...] On the wall above the chair, a picture, framed but with no glass: a print of flowers, blue irises, watercolor. Flowers are still allowed. Does each of us have the same print, the same chair, the same while curtains, I wonder?*²

¹ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Toronto, McClelland & Stewart, 1985, p. 29.

² *Ibidem*, p. 8.

In this interior monologue, Offred signals how the aesthetic of the domestic under Gilead masks the total loss of autonomy. Like Persephone plucking flowers before being seized, she confronts the contradiction between surface innocence and the machinery of control beneath. Her yearning - "Why do I want?"³ - resonates with Persephone's ambiguous desire as she consumes the pomegranate seeds. Is it survival? Is it a choice? Is it the barest mark of self-assertion in captivity? Clothing, too, marks Offred's transition into the underworld of Gilead. The red habit, long dress, and white wings function as a visual sign of confinement, simultaneously exposing and concealing the body. Atwood describes it early on: "Everything except the wings around my face is red: the colour of blood, which defines us"⁴. This definition by blood is not metaphorical but systemic: fertility is destiny, menstruation is a measure of value, and childbirth is a civic duty. As Karla Roland notes in her study of colour symbolism,

*The red of their dresses and veils immediately signifies their identity as handmaids and their function within society to onlookers. [...] All citizens of Gilead are able to recognize a handmaid by her uniform, and the handmaid is trapped by this symbolic red, unable to escape her identity or duty.*⁵

The red is not just a matter of visibility; it is a ritual marking, recalling the pomegranate's colour in the Persephone myth and functioning as a contractual seal between subject and regime.

One of the most violent scenes of symbolic descent in the novel is the Ceremony. Atwood renders it with deliberately affectless prose:

*My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. [...] I do not say making love, because this is not what he's doing. Copulating too would be inaccurate, because it would imply two people and only one is involved. Nor does rape cover it. [...] This is not recreation, even for the Commander. This is serious business. The Commander, too, is doing his duty.*⁶

The clinical detachment of this description aligns with Butler's theorisation of how subjects are constituted within regulatory discourse. In *Bodies That Matter*, she writes that "the regulatory norms of 'sex' work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies" and determine "that which qualifies a body for

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 9.

⁵ Karla M. Roland, *The Symbolic Power of Red in Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale"*, Undergraduate Honors Theses, East Tennessee State University, Digital Commons @ ETSU, 2013, p. 3.

⁶ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Toronto, McClelland & Stewart, 1985, pp. 93-94.

life within the domain of cultural intelligibility”⁷. The Ceremony in *The Handmaid’s Tale* becomes a ritual of appropriation in which Offred’s body is split and rendered legible only through its reproductive function—her lower half instrumental, her voice irrelevant. In myth, Persephone’s rape is often obscured by poetic language and divine framing. Atwood refuses such euphemism. What the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* displaces as cosmic arrangement, Atwood stages as systemic coercion disguised as holiness.

Further, the Ceremony is not merely an event; it is the temporal spine of the Handmaid’s existence. Offred’s life is organised into cycles—menstruation, impregnation, birthing, and postpartum reassignment. This cyclical structure parallels the mythic pattern of Persephone’s seasonal return to the underworld. However, unlike Persephone, Offred has no spring. Her cycle is mechanical, not natural; imposed, not negotiated. “Each month I watch for blood, fearfully, for when it comes it means failure”⁸, she confesses. Fertility here is not regenerative. It is punitive. A failed cycle leads to reassignment, exile to the Colonies, or death.

This repetition is crucial: it transforms the mythic idea of descent and return into a loop of biological subjugation. The difference between Persephone and Offred is not the underworld itself, but its temporality. Persephone, bound to a cyclical rhythm, at least returns. Offred endures. She is caught in a space that simulates return but offers only suspension—a state where time is measured by enforced reproductive roles, bureaucratic rituals, and psychological containment. As Scarano D’Antonio argues, Atwood’s protagonists often express themselves through “a poetic language that subverts the narratives from within”⁹, using intertextuality and *écriture féminine* to fracture dominant discourses and gender roles embedded in myth and society. The world above for Offred exists only in memory traces; the world below imposes no exit. Her endurance is not cyclical but recursive, haunted by repetition without renewal.

Atwood deepens this sense of timeless entrapment by disrupting the novel’s linear narrative. Offred tells her story in a mode of retrospective uncertainty, often oscillating between assertion and retraction, fantasy and recollection:

*I would like to believe this is a story I’m telling. I need to believe it. I must believe it. Those who can believe that such stories are only stories have a better chance. If it’s a story I’m telling, then I have control over the ending. Then there will be an ending, to the story, and real life will come after it. I can pick up where I left off. It isn’t a story I’m telling.*¹⁰

⁷ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”*. New York & London, Routledge, p. 2.

⁸ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Toronto, McClelland & Stewart, 1985, p. 61.

⁹ Carla Scarano D’Antonio, *An Intertextual Reading of Female Characters in Margaret Atwood’s Work*, PhD Thesis, University of Reading, 2020, p. 122.

¹⁰ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Toronto, McClelland & Stewart, 1985, pp. 39-40.

This formal instability is not merely stylistic—it reflects the psychic dislocation that occurs during descent. The myth of Persephone is traditionally narrated by others—by Demeter, by Hades, by Homer. Persephone's voice is absent. Atwood reclaims that silence, reimagining what Persephone might have sounded like had she narrated her captivity. Offred's voice, recursive and self-contradictory, enacts a resistance not grounded in clarity or coherence, but in the insistence on speech itself. She does not return to the world above; she narrates from within the underworld, and that narration becomes her act of survival.

Offred's story is not told from a position of escape, but from inside the underworld, with the voice of someone who doesn't know if she will ever re-emerge. This suspended position is reinforced in the final line of the main narrative: "And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light"¹¹. The ambiguity is mythic and anti-mythic. It echoes Persephone's oscillation between above and below but refuses to affirm that there is a promised spring. Offred does not know whether she is stepping into rescue, death, or another layer of captivity. The ending becomes an anti-teleological inversion of the Persephone myth: descent is not followed by return, but by unknowing.

Even the "Historical Notes" at the end of the novel reinforce the sense of mythic distortion. Set in a future academic conference, the male scholars who discuss Offred's narrative reduce it to an *artefact*, speculate about her sexual past, and debate the accuracy of her details. Her voice, reclaimed in secrecy, is once again subjected to patriarchal framing.

This epistemic violence mirrors the broader erasure of female agency in mythological transmission. Just as Persephone is absorbed into narratives that position her as daughter, wife, or queen—but rarely as speaker—Offred's text is transformed from testimony to object. Atwood thus performs a meta-mythic critique: the story of the descent is always mediated, constantly rewritten through patriarchal authority, unless disrupted from within.

Throughout *The Handmaid's Tale*, Gilead functions not as a metaphorical underworld, but as its modern manifestation: built not of myth but of codes, uniforms, biometric surveillance, and religious justification. Yet Atwood draws from the deep grammar of myth to reveal how these modern forms of control rely on ancient patterns of silence, cyclical violence, and the appropriation of the female body into systems of divine or state logic. By embedding the architecture of Persephone's descent into Offred's material and psychic environment, Atwood reframes the underworld not as a place below, but as the world constructed through the violent convergence of theocratic ideology and biopolitical control.

In this space, resistance cannot be epic; it must be intimate. Offred's resistance lies not in escape, but in narration, in remembering, fantasising, recalling desire. Her memories are not acts of nostalgia but acts of preservation. She remembers not to mourn the world above, but to resist being fully incorporated into the world below. The red of pomegranates marks her body, her name overwritten

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 295.

by her master's, her speech coded by regulation—but within her interior monologue, a different rhythm persists. This rhythm is not linear, nor progressive, but mythic in its own right: the rhythm of survival, repetition, and the refusal to disappear completely.

3. Rewriting the Myth – Persephone in Feminist Adaptation and Narrative Suspension

While *The Handmaid's Tale* does not explicitly reference the Persephone myth, it is steeped in its symbolic DNA, particularly in its treatment of abduction, ritualisation, and fragmented female agency. Yet Atwood does not simply transplant the classical story into a dystopian frame. Instead, she radically rewrites it in line with feminist mythopoetic strategies, exposing and challenging the narrative structures that shape the myth's traditional legacy. Her Persephone is not a passive maiden doomed to seasonal return, nor a divine queen reconciled to dual existence. She is a woman whose voice emerges from captivity, from rupture, from the absence of guarantee.

At the core of this mythic reconfiguration lies the question of return. In the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, Persephone is snatched from the surface by Hades, raped (though the poem never names it as such), and sequestered in the underworld. The compromise reached between Demeter and Zeus permits Persephone to return to her mother for part of the year. Yet the price of her reappearance is the consumption of pomegranate seeds, which binds her to Hades forever. This act has been variously interpreted as a symbol of complicity, desire, contamination, or maternal loss. What remains clear is that a ritualised, symbolic act seals Persephone's fate: her body becomes the mechanism of seasonal continuity, and her subjectivity is absorbed into a cosmological logic beyond her voice.

Atwood's Offred, too, is bound by symbolic acts and cycles. But in contrast to the myth's regulated alternation between upper and lower worlds, *The Handmaid's Tale* suspends Offred in a perpetual underworld, devoid of restoration. Her red habit—a stylised, grotesque echo of the pomegranate's hue—marks her not with cyclical fertility, but with enforced reproduction. When she remarks, “the skirt is ankle-length, full, gathered to a flat yoke that extends over the bosom and the sleeves are full”¹², the tone is clinical, observant, but disembodied. The red here does not bind her to a god, but to the state, which masks theological rape beneath the rhetoric of biblical duty.

Atwood thus transforms the Persephone motif from a myth of seasonal division into a metaphor of existential deferral, where change is neither affirmed nor denied but suspended. Offred's internal reflections deepen this sense of alienation: “Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping.”¹³ The body becomes not a site of

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 8.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 74.

fertility and return, but a foreign terrain governed by fear, duty, and control—a metaphorical locus of mythic descent without regeneration.

Offred participates in this feminist lineage, not because she speaks clearly or confidently, but precisely because she narrates without control over the outcome. Her voice is unstable, sometimes unreliable, but always a gesture of reclamation. As Scarano D'Antonio notes, Offred “gives different versions of the same episode, which underlines ambiguity and challenges the system.”¹⁴ The ambiguity here is critical. Like Persephone, Offred is not entirely sure whether she is within or beyond the tale. The story she tells may be redemptive, or it may be her only available simulation of freedom.

The act of narration thus replaces the act of return. Whereas Persephone's body was the medium of her re-entry into the upper world, Offred's body remains under control. Her voice, however, becomes her pomegranate seed—the act that binds her to her trauma but also gives her a foothold in continuity. She speaks not to escape but to remain audible. In this way, Atwood rewrites the mythic stakes of descent: instead of physical resurrection, there is narrative survival.

Feminist myth criticism has long identified the patriarchal logic embedded in classical myths. As Ostriker argues in *Stealing the Language*, myths are not neutral; they encode dominant structures of power and representation. To revise them is to intervene in their function.¹⁵ Atwood's transgression is not to invert the myth's values, but to interrupt its closure. There is no symmetrical negotiation between mother and husband, no divine compromise. There is only a system designed to convert female fertility into state currency, and a woman who writes her way into uncertainty.

This interruption is reinforced formally. The text ends without certainty. Offred's final words echo the mythic language of threshold and transition. But they refuse the mythic promise. Unlike Persephone, who steps into seasons and cosmology, Offred steps into ambiguity. We do not know where she goes or whether she survives. The story continues in a paratext—the “Historical Notes”—which, far from offering resolution, re-performs the violence of interpretive control.

In the “Historical Notes,” set in the year 2195 at the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies, a male academic named Professor Pieixoto discusses Offred's recorded narrative with detached irony. He speculates on her Commander's identity, comments on the quality of the tapes, and ultimately frames her voice as data: “we must be cautious about passing moral judgement upon the Gileadeans,” he says. “Surely we have learned by now that such judgements are of necessity culture-specific”¹⁶. In this framing, Offred's mythic role is reduced to anonymity,

¹⁴ Carla Scarano D'Antonio, *An Intertextual Reading of Female Characters in Margaret Atwood's Work*, PhD Thesis, University of Reading, 2020, p. 174.

¹⁵ Alicia Suskin Ostriker, *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America*, Boston, Beacon Press, pp. 212-213.

¹⁶ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Toronto, McClelland & Stewart, 1985, p. 311.

her voice recuperated into an institutional apparatus that mirrors the one she tried to escape.

Here, Atwood offers a devastating postscript to the Persephone myth: even when women speak, their speech may be contained. What survives is not their pain or their experience, but their value as interpretive artefacts. The metaphor of the underworld thus extends beyond Gilead into the world of scholarship, where the past is processed through the lens of authority. Offred's narrative becomes Persephone's pomegranate seeds—held by others, tasted, studied, but no longer her own.

Yet this is not a negation of resistance. As Naomi R. Mercer explains, feminist dystopias resist closure not through despair but by refusing the traditional subjugation of the individual, thus “open[ing] a space of contestation and opposition for those collective ‘ex-centric’ subjects”¹⁷ (Baccolini and Moylan 7) marginalised by dominant systems. The absence of return, the refusal of restoration, and the ambiguity of fate in *The Handmaid's Tale* are not signs of defeat but elements of a new mythic grammar—one that articulates survival as repetition-with-difference rather than salvation.

Offred's Persephone is not a goddess, nor a mythic figure. She is a woman who remembers a daughter, slips a butter packet into her shoe, and imagines the voice of her mother. Her resistance is minuscule, slow, untheatrical—and precisely because of this, it defies the expectations of mythic narrative. It does not transcend history; it endures it. Atwood's radical move is to demythologise the myth: to strip it of its divine structure and embed it within the messiness of state terror, gendered violence, and uncertain narration. This Persephone does not return. But she stammers incompletely, and with the full weight of her survival suspended in the telling.

4. Feminist Theory in Practice – Cixous, Kristeva, Butler

The critical depth of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* lies not merely in its mythic parallels with Persephone, but in a literary strategy that performs key insights from feminist theory. Rather than simply illustrating theoretical frameworks, Atwood's narrative enacts them, particularly the work of Cixous, Kristeva, and Butler. Through voice, memory, and disrupted form, storytelling becomes a site of resistance under theocratic control.

Cixous's *écriture féminine* offers a compelling lens through which to view Offred's narration. In *Le Rire de la Méduse*, Cixous calls for a writing that emerges from the female body and defies phallogocentric coherence, embracing affect, contradiction, and bodily memory. Offred's voice, caught between secrecy and surveillance, unfolds associatively rather than linearly—marked by hesitation, digression, and uncertainty. This is not merely a stylistic issue, but an existential one. Storytelling, for Offred, is a survival mechanism: a bodily compulsion rather than a declaration of identity. Her memories—such as using stolen butter as a

¹⁷ Raffaella Baccolini, Tom Moylan (eds.), *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, New York, Routledge, 2003, p. 7.

makeshift lotion—are acts of *écriture féminine*, where the body inscribes meaning in defiance of linguistic and narrative control.

This resistance also aligns with Kristeva's theory of the semiotic as opposed to the symbolic. In *Revolution in Poetic Language* (*La révolution du langage poétique*, 1974), she describes the symbolic as the domain of grammar, law, and patriarchal order, while the semiotic encompasses rhythm, affect, and the body's unconscious drives. Gilead is constructed entirely through symbolic mechanisms: codified speech, enforced rituals, and reproductive hierarchies. Even language is formulaic—"Blessed be the fruit," "May the Lord open"¹⁸—foreclosing subjectivity and reducing women to roles. Yet Offred's inner monologue revives the semiotic through texture, sensation, and affect. Her memory of rubbing butter on her skin—"there's no longer any hand lotion or face cream, not for us"¹⁹—is not an explanation but a tactile revolt. Language, in this moment, touches rather than tells.

Maternal memory intensifies this semiotic current. Offred's recollections of her daughter are involuntary, ghostlike: "She fades, I can't keep her here with me, she's gone now."²⁰ The child becomes both a lost object and a fragment of Offred's self. This aligns with Kristeva's concept of the *chora*—the maternal space before language and identity. The trauma of being severed from this space is not just thematic but formally encoded in Offred's fractured narrative. Her voice slips between symbolic structures and the affective pull of what cannot be said.

Butler's theory of gender performativity further illuminates how identity in Gilead is imposed and reiterated. Gender roles, such as Handmaid, Wife, and Martha, are constructed through costume, language, and reproductive function. As Offred observes, "We are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices."²¹ Gender here is not expressed; it is assigned and enacted under coercion. Yet Butler argues that all performance contains potential slippage. Offred inhabits her role outwardly while mocking it inwardly. Her ironic repetition of phrases like "Praise be"²² undermines their authority, allowing resistance to emerge within enforced performance.

Still, Butler reminds us that resistance arises from within subjection. Offred's voice, name, and survival strategies are products of the system she resists. Her narrative is not free, but it finds fissures within domination. This precariousness is dramatised in the "Historical Notes," where academic men reframe her story. Her voice becomes an artefact, her identity speculative, and her experience objectified. As Professor Pieixoto speculates on her sexual past and narrative gaps, he reenacts the epistemic violence the novel exposes.

Yet the story ends not with closure but with ambiguity: "into the darkness within; or else the light." This refusal of mythic return marks Atwood's rejection of

¹⁸ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Toronto, McClelland & Stewart, 1985, p. 22.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 96.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 65.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 136.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 21.

redemptive closure. Offred's narrative does not resolve but persists. Her voice, fragmented and embodied, becomes an act of feminist survivance—resistance through telling, memory, and rhythm.

By engaging Cixous, Kristeva, and Butler as embedded logics rather than external frameworks, Atwood constructs not a myth retold but a myth interrupted—a poetics of speaking from within the underworld rather than escaping it.

5. Conclusions: Myth, Ambiguity, and the Afterlife of Voice

Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* does not merely evoke the Persephone myth as allegory; it enacts a radical reconfiguration of its symbolic logic. Rather than upholding the myth's theodicy, cyclicity, or conciliatory structure, Atwood strips it to reveal a feminist countermyth rooted in rupture, fragmentation, and suspended voice. Offred, the novel's narrator, occupies a state of perpetual descent, without return, without spring, without the comfort of mythic resolution. Yet through tactile, halting narration, she enacts a form of resistance that does not reclaim freedom or identity, but preserves memory, sensation, and voice, even in the absence of an audience.

The classical Persephone myth, canonically told in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, survives in part due to its narrative symmetry: the trauma of abduction is balanced by the promise of return; winter yields to spring, death to life. But this resolution depends on the containment of Persephone's voice—she is spoken for, never by herself. Atwood imagines what it means to inhabit the underworld without the narrative overlay that redeems it. Gilead is not a metaphorical Hades—it is a real system of patriarchal, theocratic, and biopolitical domination enacted through law, dress, surveillance, and ritualised rape. There are no gods here, only men in power and women stripped of names.

Offred's only weapon is narration. But even this is fragile—subject to distortion, silencing, and scholarly appropriation. Her story, secretly recorded and posthumously analysed, is anonymised and interpreted by academics in the novel's "Historical Notes." They do not offer closure but underscore the recursive violence of male interpretation. Her voice is absorbed into a new symbolic order—not by theocrats, but by scholars—linking myth, state, and academia in a shared economy of erasure.

And yet, it is the voice, not the commentary, that endures. Offred's narration resists being reduced to an artefact or evidence. Its lyric rhythm, self-doubt, and refusal of closure constitute what may be called survivance—a literary persistence beyond victimhood. Unlike Persephone, Offred does not bring fertility or emerge into light. Her return is textual, not physical: a whispered, fractured telling that survives despite, and within, the underworld.

This narrative fracture places Atwood firmly within the tradition of feminist myth revision. She does not rewrite Persephone's lines; she refuses the mythic structure altogether. Offred's fate remains unresolved; her voice remains open. She speaks from a place where even the act of speaking is precarious. In this, Atwood enacts Alicia Ostriker's "revisionist mythmaking"—not to restore myth, but to

dismantle its epistemic violence and offer an alternate grammar of female experience.

Atwood's engagement with feminist theory is integral to this revision. Offred's fragmented, embodied narrative reflects Cixous's *écriture féminine*—a writing of the body that disrupts linear logic. Kristeva's concept of the semiotic—pre-symbolic rhythms and affect illuminates the pulses of memory and emotion beneath Offred's constrained language. Butler's theory of performativity frames Offred's role as a Handmaid not as an internalised identity but as a compulsory performance, subtly subverted from within.

What emerges is not a myth of transcendence, but one of endurance. No goddess intervenes. No seasonal balance is restored. Yet Offred remembers. She writes—though orally, in secret, without certainty of reception. Her voice does not rise from the underworld; it reverberates inside it. That resonance is the novel's most radical gesture: the insistence that narration itself, however fractured, is an act of resistance.

The novel ends not with revelation, but ambiguity: “into the darkness within; or else the light.”²³ This refusal to stabilise meaning defies mythic closure. Atwood offers no return—only the echo of a voice that, by speaking, refuses to be erased. *The Handmaid's Tale* thus becomes not a retelling of Persephone's descent and return, but a dismantling of the mythic machinery that would claim to make sense of her silence.

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²³ *Ibidem*, p. 295.